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DE RUEHAK #2405/01 2681047

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FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3827

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002405

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/21/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: PRESIDENT GUL OFF TO A PURPOSEFUL BUT CAUTIOUS START

REF: ANKARA 02403

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, for Reasons 1.4 (b ,d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment. President Gul's first weeks in office have set the tone for a more open, accessible, and constructively engaged presidency than that of his predecessor, Ahmet Necdet Sezer. Gul is trying to demonstrate that he represents all Turks, not just those who voted for his former Justice and Development Party (AKP), and appears to be working to neutralize secularist fears that his presidency will oversee the end of the secular Republic. Grudging signs of minimal courtesy are gradually being wrested from the military. Meanwhile, what is coming to be called the "headscarf protocol" has generals literally jumping to avoid shaking hands with headscarved Mrs. Gul. Several upcoming events will give more clues to what kind of presidency we can expect from Abdullah Gul. End Summary and Comment.

Careful First Steps Seek to Overcome Snubs

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¶2. (C) In a flurry of receptions opening his tenure, Gul broadened presidential guest lists to include a more representative swath of organizations, including the Human Rights Association and Alevi leaders. New weekly public tours of the presidential palace (the working offices as well the museum) signal Gul's intention to be a more accessible president than his predecessor.

¶3. (C) How Gul conducted his two initial trips -- by now protocol for incoming Presidents -- offers a window into his approach to the presidency. Gul's first official travel was to the troubled Southeast, where he literally reached out and touched the people, more broadly and tangibly than had his predecessor. There he met with the provincial governors, local officials, NGOs, and Van's 100 Yil University, but paid no formal call on the controversial mayor of Diyarbakir (although they did shake hands upon Gul's arrival in the city and met privately on the margins of an NGO meeting). He preached reconciliation and advised people that it would help them receive the services they deserved. He mingled with cheering locals, in stark contrast to his stiff predecessor. He sought to reassure the military that the fight against terrorism would continue, and showed his

appreciation for military efforts by breaking the Ramadan fast with soldiers serving near the Iraqi border.

¶ 14. (C) Gul's first trip "abroad" -- to the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)" -- also de rigueur, was as much a domestic trip, well-chosen as both an object of Turkish national affection and investment, and also as a military priority. On his September 18-19 trip, he reiterated Turkish commitment to the "TRNC," calling on the EU in particular to end the Turkish Cypriots' economic isolation, and for a unitary settlement that acknowledged the two separate communities. He also defended the role of the Turkish army, which maintains troops on the island.

¶ 15. (C) Gul signaled his intent to remain engaged with the U.S. by meeting with U/S Burns on September 19 -- a leap down in protocol which was organized by a Gul "drop by" at a Burns meeting with his Secretary General. Similarly, he highlighted his commitment to European relations by agreeing to address the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly -- with which he has longstanding relations -- in October.

¶ 16. (SBU) Gul has approved 5 government appointments so far, with some moderate controversy. Tahsin Burcuoglu, new NSC Secretary General, had been turned down for that post by

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President Sezer, who had been irritated by the government's failure to consult with him (he cited no complaints against Burcuoglu personally, however) (reftel). Sezer had twice rejected Sehabettin Harput, Interior Ministry U/S, who later earned the informal title of "Pirate U/S" when -- as Acting U/S to then-Interior Minister Aksu -- he began signing documents as "U/S." In 2000, Harput had been recalled to Ankara from the Urfa governorship after calling on an

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audience at the opening of a girls' Koran course to "gather round the Koran." Of the 26 government decrees that have crossed the new president's desk, Gul approved 15 and is studying the other 11.

¶ 17. (C) Left with little option in the face of a generally satisfied public, top generals have grudgingly come a long way in the past few weeks, at least superficially. After weak excuses for their conspicuous absence from President Gul's August 28 swearing-in, Turkish General Staff CHOD Buyukanit on September 10 formally called on Gul to congratulate him, just prior to Gul's departure for the Southeast. Initially referring to Gul coldly as "Mr. President," Buyukanit recently adopted the more customary "My President." None of the force commanders accompanied the president to the Southeast, where he was met by the local Jandarma helicopter fleet command (the CHOD had accompanied President Sezer there in 2001). Following his return to Ankara, Gul made an official return courtesy call on Buyukanit at TGS, an unusual event from a protocol standpoint, forcing TGS to receive him with full ceremony.

¶ 18. (C) Meanwhile the First Lady has tried, not altogether successfully, to avoid situations that might lead to public snubs. The headscarf-toting Mrs. Gul initially sat out official receptions and ceremonies, even those hosted by her husband. She remained in the background on their two-day "TRNC" visit; even so, military officials bent over backwards to avoid her. The normal airport military ceremony to welcome the President to the "TRNC" was relocated to the presidential palace and limited to the visiting President, with a two- and three-star general attending. Mrs. Gul broke the fast privately with "TRNC First Lady" Mrs. Talat, while President Gul did so with the generals, who departed before the start of "President" Talat's reception (which Mrs. Gul attended). Upon the Gul's return to Ankara, the three-star general present at the airport jumped across the red carpet apparently to dodge shaking Mrs. Gul's hand; he later denied that motive for his behavior. Mrs. Gul has yet to move into

the presidential palace; renovation works will preclude the family's arrival for at least six months, according to press.

Five Benchmark Moments

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19. (C) President Gul's Chief Foreign Policy Advisor, former ambassador to Tehran Gurcan Turkoglu, told us Gul's "TRNC" visit was the first of a series of key speeches over the next two months in which he will address a variety of audiences. They will provide insights into the kind of presidency we can expect. The military's response will also be closely tracked for signs of a truce, if not a thaw in relations. From the "general watchers'" perspective, a key event will be the October 29 Turkish Independence Day reception, which Gul will host with his wife. The remaining four speeches are:

--October 1: Gul will deliver opening remarks at parliament.  
--October 2/3: Gul will address the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly.  
--October 31: Gul will address the Iraq Expanded Neighbors ministerial in Istanbul.  
--November 17: Gul will address the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Economic and Commercial Cooperation Permanent Committee.

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